A Virtue Approach Instead of a Kantian Approach as a Solution to Major Dilemma’s in Meta-ethics? A Criticism of David Carr

A. TELLINGS

University of Nijmegen, Nijmegen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT: This contribution is a criticism of some points David Carr brings forward both in his 1991 book (Educating the Virtues) but even more so in his 1996 article in this journal (After Kohlberg: Some Implications of an Ethics of Virtue for the Theory of Moral Education and Development). With the help of a virtue approach Carr tries to solve the moral objectivism-moral relativism dilemma and the deontologism-consequentialism dilemma in ethics. I will argue that his attempt, though very interesting, suffers from some serious flaws and that, either, Carr’s position is much closer to a Kantian approach than Carr thinks, or Carr’s position needs a good deal of clarification.

KEY WORDS: virtue ethics, moral education, meta-ethics, Kohlberg

INTRODUCTION

In his 1991 book (Educating the Virtues) but even more so in his 1996 article in this journal (After Kohlberg: Some Implications of an Ethics of Virtue for the Theory of Moral Education and Development), David Carr defends a virtue approach against a Kohlbergian-Kantian approach. Also, with the help of a virtue approach he tries to solve two major philosophical dilemma’s in ethics and in moral education, namely, the objectivism-relativism dilemma and the deontologism-consequentialism dilemma, taking a sort of middle position.

Now, I think it is very useful to try, as Carr does, to solve dilemma’s which have major implications for our ethical thinking and acting, and his attempt is very interesting. However, I think Carr does not succeed completely in his attempt. In this contribution, I will first briefly sketch Carr’s endeavour, drawing mainly from his article, where necessary completed with references to his book. Thereupon, I will criticize the solutions Carr brings forward to the two dilemma’s just mentioned and I will argue that, either, Carr stands closer to Kant than he thinks, or his position needs some major clarifications.
In his 1996 article, Carr starts with stating that the Kohlbergian approach has dominated research into and reflection upon moral education for several decades but that, recently, serious criticisms against Kohlberg have favoured a virtue approach (p. 353). The main criticism Carr mentions is that the Kohlbergian approach is too cognitivist and individualistic, that is, it emphasizes reasoning too much at the cost of affect, motivation, virtue, and actual moral conduct (p. 354). Also, according to Carr, Kohlberg’s approach is blameworthy for its Rousseauian and Neillian advocation of a moral education which emphasizes ‘disinterested contemplation of artificially constructed moral dilemmas avoiding, as far as possible, any kinds of direct exposure to or initiation into received traditions of human moral life’ (p. 365) and for its Kantian advocation of a ‘view from nowhere’ (pp. 358, 361) conception of prescriptivity rooted in ‘some sort of algorithm for the mathematical deduction of necessary conclusions from moral axioms’ (p. 362). Carr argues that these deficiencies of Kohlberg’s approach cannot be mended by simply adding to it what it misses because Kohlberg’s theory is incompatible with theories that emphasize affect, motivation, etcetera. Also, Kohlberg’s theory cannot be repaired by integrating it with a virtue approach because both approaches have a fundamentally different view of the relation between principles and dispositions. Whereas the Kantian takes moral principles to be constitutive – they are the sole source and foundation of morality –, Carr says, the Aristotelian takes them to be regulatory (pp. 354–355). Carr then goes on to discuss a virtue approach. He focuses on two major dilemma’s in moral theory, that is, he seeks to place a virtue approach somewhere in the middle, first, between relativism and objectivism and, second, between Kantianism and Utilitarianism.

According to Carr, the virtue approach is often accused of relativism because of the assumed internal relation between virtues and beliefs. Virtues (or moral behaviour) are internally related to beliefs, and since beliefs ‘. . . may well be incommensurable between different human communities – what counts as a virtue can only be a matter of extreme cultural relativity . . .’ (p. 358). Carr rejects this conclusion as being circular – the conclusion assumes in advance that moral beliefs are just culturally determined conventions – and as incorrectly assuming that beliefs are logically prior to virtues or dispositions. He argues that the internal relation between beliefs and virtues does not imply a specific logical order between them. Indeed, many virtue theorists reverse the order. They maintain that underlying socially constructed moral beliefs ‘there is a common human concern with the development of morally significant behavioural dispositions and responses which in a real sense cut across local differences of social code and creed’ (p. 358). Nevertheless, Carr says, it is a legitimate question to ask how the context-boundedness of moral beliefs can be connected to the objectivity of virtues if there is an internal relation between beliefs and